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AUTHOR Kearns, Richard; Bannister, Linda
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ABSTRACT

Richard Mitchell, the "Underground Grammarian," has been dismissed by many in the academic community as a pop-culture grammar-basher. This is unfortunate, since Mitchell has linked literacy to the capacity for moral behavior. This connection between moral capacity and literacy is often avoided by the way in which literacy is defined. In western society, literacy was a prerequisite to well-being; illiteracy was symptomatic of malaise and decline. Much of the concern about literacy stems from assumptions about its consequences: cognitive, economic, and social. Yet while these consequences can be used to organize the literature on literacy, they skirt the issue of what literacy is. Literacy has to do with meaning and the pursuit of truth, neither of which reside in texts. Literacy, then, is found in the skilled, thoughtful habits of the mind and the strengths of the heart. Just as meaning is not contained in the text on a page, literacy cannot be found in the ability to decipher those texts, but in the habits and strengths needed to create meanings and to challenge foolishness--on the page, from the lips of others, and from individuals themselves. (MM)

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Linda Bannister
Richard Kearns
Loyola Marymount University
7101 West 80th Street
Los Angeles, CA 90045
Office: (213) 642-2854

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Linda Bannister

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The Rhetoric of Richard Mitchell:

Is Literacy a Moral Condition?

Richard Mitchell--the Underground Grammarian--has been written off by many in the academic community as a pop-culture grammar-basher. This is unfortunate.

Unfortunate because Mitchell has much to say to us that links reading, writing and thinking--literacy--to our capacity for moral behavior. Consider Mitchell's statement about literacy in his recent essay, "Hunger in America":

> Literacy is not a knack. It is a moral condition. The ability to read attentively, reflectively, and judiciously is also the ability to be attentive. reflective and judicious. It [literacy] is not an optional adornment for just and sane living. It is

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a necessity. It is the necessity.

We would like to suggest to you today--as Mitchell suggests--that literacy is a moral condition. This is a compelling, but also a very troubling conclusion. We hope to trouble you today.

We discovered, though, in writing the first draft of this paper, that any connection between moral capacity and literacy can be--and often is--easily avoided by the way in which we choose to define literacy. So, in addition to looking at what literacy is, we found it necessary to look at what literacy is not. It is with both these questions in mind that we begin our discussion.

Nearly 35 years ago, urged on by Rudolph Flesch, the academic community decided that Johnny couldn't read. It was inevitable that we'd decide that Johnny couldn't write, either.

Powerful theoretical and pedagogical movements followed (Back to Basics, Process Not Product, The Revival of Rhetoric), and a great body of literature on literacy was produced. Since large numbers of Americans, including our children, were considered "functionally illiterate," it became important to define literacy so that its absence--illiteracy--could be

detected, avoided and, some day, eradicated.

In western society, literacy was a prerequisite to well-being; illiteracy was symptomatic of malaise and decline. As Eugene Kintgen, Barry Kroll and Mike Rose point out in their book Perspectives on Literacy, much of our concern about literacy stems from what we've assumed its consequences to be. They articulate three: cognitive, economic and social.

The cognitive consequences of literacy are proposed by a number of researchers: Goody, Ong, Havelock, D'Angelo. These are the proponents of the "Great Divide" theory of literacy. As Frank D'Angelo put it, "Literacy makes possible modes of thinking that cannot be acquired in any other way." He and the other "great divide" theorists propose that non-literate thinking is concrete, specific, situational, perceptual. Literate thinking is abstract, generalized, systematic, theoretical, propositional, metalinguistic. Walter Ong argues that literacy alters and transforms our noetic habits. It gives us history, logic, astronomy, science, even democracy.

Researchers on the other side of the great divide--notably Scribner, Cole, Hartwell and Gough--argue that literacy does not automatically and invariably confer special

powers; the consequences of literacy depend upon social context. Literacy is adapted to the society that uses it; the cognitive consequences of literacy are limited and constitute no revolution in cognition. Simply put, one camp argues the congnitive consequences of literacy are great; the other argues they are minimal.

Economic consequences, part two of the trinity of consequences of literacy, are usually judged crucial by western culture at large. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization--UNESCO--has linked literacy and economic development. It says at least 40% of a country must be literate before an economy can stabilize. This attitude is popularized and propagated by most colleges and universities; they woo students with promises of future employment and financial security. They say education--literacy--is the boost needed to climb out of the ghetto, out of poverty.

The third consequence of literacy is social. As Harvey Graff observes in The Literacy Myth, here literacy is associated with a triumph of light over darkness, with new ideas, liberalism and universal, unbridled progress. Simply put, enlightened social change is possible because of literacy.

These three consequences of literacy--cognitive, economic and social--can be used to organize the literature on literacy, but they (and often the literature itself) still skirt the issue of what literacy is.

Well, it's simple, isn't it? If I shoot someone and kill him, aren't I a murderer? If I write a sentence and then read it, aren't I literate?

Perhaps.

I can elicit a kind of reading, writing and thinking from the 30-pound hunk of circuitry and plastic in my office. But my word processor cannot understand anything, cannot make judgements, cannot make new truths. My word processor is not literate.

Pat Hartwell, in a perceptive article about fostering literacy in the freshman compositon class, begins to address the issue of literacy as an ability to create and re-create meaning, and the involvement of self in our literate pursuits. He points out that we don't organize our literate lives around facts or knowledges or procedures (the stuff of the traditional classroom), but around metaphors and around narratives. "We [academics] are deeply implicated with--even, in some small way,

constitutive of--human literacy," Hartwell writes, "yet most of us spend our professional lives chipping away at the veneer of language, while literacy . . . goes deep into the grain of the wood."

In other words, we have spent so much time connecting literacy with texts and with "symptoms" and "consequences," we have overlooked our own intimate participation in the process of literacy.

Literacy is more than a knowledge of words, more than a following of proper procedures. The substance of literateness is not in one's ability as a decipherer, a communicator. To read is not merely to translate words into a message; to write is not merely to translate a message into words. Literacy has to do with meaning and the pursuit of truth, neither of which reside in words, sentences, paragraphs, documents--in texts. Meaning and truth reside in human beings. We create them. We discover them. We resurrect them.

Consider what Richard Mitchell says about his own writing--a methodology, if you will:

> I must do this: I must put before me the page and write. And there stands what I have said, and it is a rebuke. It must be a rebuke. It says, "Well,

> what now?" Or it says, "Seems to me it was different yesterday." Or it asks "What does that word, in fact, mean?"
>
> Then the next sentence is a response to its rebuke, and also a new rebuke.

What is Richard Mitchell doing when he writes? Is he not testing the truth of the meaning he has made, struggling to make new meaning, new truth with every new sentence? Will he not use every trick and method and skill of language he has to fashion each sentence as he makes it? And, more important, will he not plumb each sentence for truth as he reads it? Are his skills and methods and tricks of language the focus of his literate activities? We think not.

"Good writing," says Mitchell in another essay, "comes of attentive thoughtfulness in the service of truth." So does good reading. So does true literacy.

The literate person, writes Mitchell in an earlier work, Less than Words Can Say,

> . . .can formulate sentences that make sense. He can choose the right word from an array of similar words. He can devise the structures that show how things and statements about things are related to one another. He can generate strings of sentences that develop logically related thoughts, and arrange them in such a way as to make that logic clear to others. He can make analogies and define classes. He can, in writing, discover thought and

> make knowledge. Because he can do these things, he can, in reading, determine whether or not someone else can do these things. He is familiar with the technology of thinking.

We chose carefully the reprint we have given to you today--"Hunger in America." It is an astonishing and powerful piece of writing that ostensibly deals with literacy and the lack thereof. In it, Mitchell recounts

> the plight of a man who knows the letters and the words, but who cannot read at all, and because he imagines that he can, he was found guilty of certain criminal acts related to the death of his son.
>
> [Mitchell writes of] Bill Barnhart's child [who] died of hunger at the age of two and a half. For five months, what nourishment the boy had been able to swallow was gobbled up by the tumor that was growing in his belly. The child shriveled and the tumor prospered, until its greed undid them both. After a meager last supper, a few dry Cheerios and a sip of grape juice, host and guest died quietly together.

The kicker in this story is that Barnhart never took his son to a doctor because he "read" a passage in the Bible and felt the Bible forbade him to seek medical help.

It is a sad and shocking story. But what makes the essay remarkable is how Mitchell tells it, and what he understands from it. Bill Barnhart "read" a text, but because he was not literate--because he was blind to the metaphor the Biblical

author created, because he couldn't understand it--he sat by and let his son die.

Most of us would read this tale and feel embarrassed about the necessity of intruding on another human being's religion, another human being's beliefs. Mitchell, however, saw a grand metaphor: there is no difference between Bill Barnhart and his son and us. All of us are dying of what Mitchell calls "the tumor that lives in the belly, the feeling that feeling is knowing." We share Bill Barnhart's illiteracy when we are inattentive, when we let our sentiments make our decisions for us, when we fail to distinguish between feeling and thinking. We are all dying of hunger--like Bill Barnhart's son--for the nourishment that truth and thoughtfulness bring us.

Mitchell concludes:

> . . . the simpleton religionists have no better friends than the simpleton educationists, who turn out, yearly, millions of empty children, prepared not for life, but only for the unexamined life, and so terribly hungry that they will swallow anything.
>
> They will take no balm. In vain will they gobble up dry cheerios and guzzle down grape juice, for they will never be nourished.

And if there is an effect that Mitchell sees resulting from a lack of literacy, it is peril. Mitchell puts it this way:

> We are a people who imagine that we are weighing important issues when we exchange generalizations and well-known opinions. We decide how to vote or what to buy according to whim or fancied self-interest, either of which is easily engendered in us by the manipulation of language, which we have neither the will nor the ability to analyze. We believe that we can reach conclusions without having the faintest idea of the difference between inferences and statements of fact, often without any suspicions that there are such things and that they ARE different. . . . We do not notice elementary fallacies in logic; it doesn't even occur to us to look for them; few of us are even aware that such things exist. We make no regular distinctions between those kinds of things that can be known and objectively verified and those that can only be believed or not. . . . We are easy prey.

Certainly social consequences. Certainly cognitive consequences. And certainly economic consequences. But for Mitchell, the consequence of illiteracy--and of literacy--takes on a new dimension: human consequence. Morality. Listen carefully while we re-read his earlier statement:

> Literacy is not a knack. It is a moral condition. The ability to read attentively, reflectively, and judiciously is also the ability to be attentive. reflective and judicious. Literacy is not an optional adornment for just and sane living. It is a necessity. It is <u>the</u> necessity.

Mitchell continues:

> **Literacy** is not a variety or portion of education. It <u>is</u> education. It is the whole thing, the wholesome nourishment of the mind, by which the mind may grow strong enough to be the master of the will and not its slave, the judge of desire and not its procurer, the censor of sentiment and not its tool, and the inquisitor of belief, not its flack. **Literacy** is our only path to whatever wisdom we can have, which is our only path to whatever goodness we can know, which is our only path to whatever happiness we can enjoy.

Literacy, then, is found in the skilled, thoughtful habits of our minds and the strengths of our hearts. Just as meaning is not contained in the text on a page, literacy cannot be found in the ability to decipher those texts, but in the habits and strengths needed to create meanings and to challenge foolishness--on the page, from the lips of others, and in ourselves.